

I'm here to speak with you today about the real, diverse, and changing rural America. As I thought about the trends currently facing rural communities, I found myself making connections with my own life experiences. So I would like to share with you the story of my family and my community as a way of highlighting some of the ongoing challenges faced by rural Americans, and at the same time, emphasizing the resourcefulness, spirit, and work ethic found in rural communities.

I grew up in a rural community 20 miles north of the Mexican border in the southernmost tip of Texas. The community known as Monte Alto had one blinking yellow light, signaling its 1200 residents and passersby to slow down through the ½ mile stretch of highway that traversed our "town". Though we called Monte Alto a town, it was really an unincorporated community, surrounded by crops and pastures. The superintendent of schools usually represented Monte Alto in the capacity of mayor whenever neighboring city or county officials included our town in regional governance meetings. The largest, and nearly only, employers are the school district, a produce processing plant and an agricultural research operation.

It was that farming operation that sustained my family; my father worked there as a laborer for most of my life. Orphaned at the age of 10, my father emigrated from Mexico with his two older brothers at that young age. When his brothers were deported, my father was taken in by a Monte Alto family who raised him. The Buentello's were an entrepreneurial family; they farmed and owned a couple of local businesses. They had the means and felt a responsibility to look after the frightened and lonesome boy living in one of their rental properties.

Attending school in the early 1950s, at a time when schools across the country did not value racial equality much less immigrant integration, my father felt forced out of school in the 5th grade. He took up work on the family farm and became a skilled agricultural laborer. He later married my mother and built a small home for his growing family across the street from the Buentello's. My mother was a stay-at-home mom, except from late spring to early fall when my family became part of the migrant stream and traveled to northern parts of Texas, and other parts of the country, to work as seasonal agricultural workers. This labor sustained us. My six siblings and I may not have had access to luxuries such as healthcare, but we had what we needed to survive. We had hardworking and loving parents and a community with a deep sense of kinship, where people took care of each other.

Coming of age in the 1980s, I saw my community struggle with the economic recession affecting the rest of the country; though, my community had long been experiencing an economic downturn. I remember hearing elders talk nostalgically about Monte Alto's heyday in the 1930s and 40s, when there was an abundance of jobs, businesses, people and social activity. In the 1950's, factors such as the mechanization of labor and several devastating freezes led to the decline of the agricultural industry throughout South Texas. People moved elsewhere to find work. In addition, changing political currents—punctuated by the 1968 high school walkout by Mexican American students in protest of a racially oppressive school environment – spurred a “white flight” of the local economic elite from our neighboring towns and centers of commerce, Edcouch and Elsa.

It's been nearly half a century since these depressed conditions have plagued my community. And though there has been growth in our region of Texas—in the Rio Grande Valley—most of the growth is concentrated in metropolitan areas, leaving little investment in surrounding rural communities like Monte Alto, Edcouch, and Elsa.

We have realized the need to invest in ourselves. Our families have learned and emphasized that education is the key for economic advancement, a finding also reached by USDA's Economic Research Service. And although education research indicates that parents like mine, with schooling up to 5th grade and 8th grade respectively, cannot value education or properly support their childrens' educational attainment, my community has seen different outcomes. With the support of our families and of caring educators, we have seen a sincere and successful effort to build our local human and social capital.

Despite historical underinvestment by government, exciting efforts have been initiated by homegrown leaders to revitalize the community's economy and quality of life. When I was in high school, my teachers and mentors who grew up in our community recognized our abundance of assets and began raising our educational expectations. As our parents had told us, these teachers reiterated that not only was college possible for us, but that it was necessary, and that many of us were talented enough to compete for admission at the most prestigious universities. And although a majority of rural adults advise youth not to remain in their communities, we were encouraged to return home after college.

When I graduated from Yale University in 1997, I returned to my community. I am now a high school teacher and program director of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, a nonprofit organization which was established to carry out

the important mission of building a sustainable community by investing in human and social capital development.

We redefined our teaching and began to use place-based strategies to engage our students in learning about community history, researching contemporary community issues, and working with civic leaders to find solutions for local issues. In our ten years of work, we've seen young people experience relevant and high-quality learning in school, find meaning and value in their community, build leadership and skills, and understand the functions of civic institutions. Unlike many rural communities which experience youth out-migration, we are seeing our young people return as invested professionals and community leaders.

With a critical mass of leaders dedicated to the revitalization of our community, we have seen interest by elected officials, such as our Congressman Ruben Hinojosa, in developing the economic vitality and infrastructure of our community. New federal investments are coming in to help us challenge high poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, and inadequate civic institutions. While much work remains, we recognize that we have begun to challenge the shackles of chronic political marginalization. It is time to make full use of our human and cultural assets to advocate for policies and conditions that will truly allow our community and others like it to prosper.

My experience shows that rural Americans have the capacity to find solutions to the challenges facing their communities, though it is not our responsibility alone. Our government must be an equal partner, enacting policy that adequately supports the unbridled efforts of rural communities. The richest country in the world cannot allow its

rural residents to go without the monetary and informational resources necessary to create access to livable wages, economic development, quality education, affordable housing, affordable healthcare, accessible transportation, modern technologies, and racial and ethnic understanding. It is time to move beyond the farm bill's large agricultural subsidies to meet the needs of a broad-base of rural Americans.